

Planning Update

San Joaquin National Wildlife Refuge

Shorter days and longer shadows signal the coming of the fall migration. Fall migrants are starting to arrive at the San Joaquin River National Wildlife Refuge and the refuge staff is busy preparing for their guests. Lesser and greater sandhill cranes have already been seen, along with waterfowl and shorebirds, including Canada geese, mallard, and pintail. Neo-tropical migrants have also made their presence known on the refuge this season. The refuge is busy getting ready to flood up roost ponds for the winter.

Greetings!

This is the second in a series of updates from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) to keep you informed about planning efforts for the San Joaquin River National Wildlife Refuge (refuge). We will be sending these planning updates regularly to landowners near the study area, government agencies, private organizations, and others who express interest.

This update presents a description of the work we've been doing on the plan and the planning process we are undertaking.

Where We Started

In 1997, Congress passed the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act. The Act formulated a mission for the Refuge System, and states that all wildlife refuges must have a comprehensive conservation plan in place by the year 2013. These plans will provide a 15-year guide, using the best available scientific knowledge, to help managers achieve the purposes for which each refuge was established, and to work toward the mission of the Refuge System. The Act gives the Service guidance for managing refuges in a way that ensures the long-term conservation of fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats. Maintenance of biological integrity and diversity along with facilitating compatible wildlife-dependent recreation in the refuge system are two of the important principles laid out in the Act.

What We've Been Doing

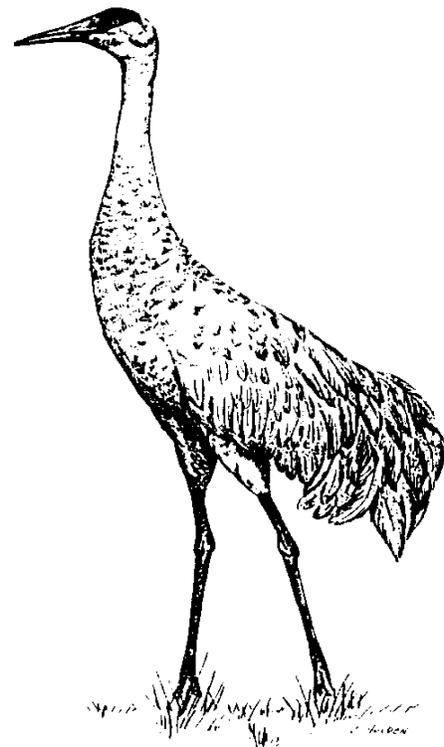
Since the last planning update, sent out in March 1999, the planning team has been working on the comprehensive conservation plan for the San Joaquin River Refuge. The planning team has been meeting monthly to discuss various issues to be addressed in the plan. The planning team also held an open house at the

Stanislaus County Agricultural Center in Modesto. We describe the meeting later in this planning update.

In addition to reviewing and analyzing comments from within the Service, other agencies, and members of the public, we have been gathering information on existing conditions at the refuge. We have started writing the introduction, refuge description, and resource analysis sections of the plan and environmental assessment. We have almost completed data collection on existing Federal lands within the refuge boundary. An inventory and analysis of the natural and cultural resources at the refuge are still in progress.

Open House

On March 17, 1999, the planning team hosted an open house at the Stanislaus County Agricultural Center in Modesto. We would like to thank all of you who participated. We left with a better understanding and appreciation of your concerns and desires for the refuge. The public was invited to attend to learn about



Sandhill Crane
US Fish and Wildlife Service Staff

the refuge and the planning effort and to share their views on refuge management. We publicized the meeting in the previous planning update and through a press release. The press release brought two news crews and a newspaper reporter to the refuge, all of whom produced news stories about the refuge.

At the meeting, staff gave an overview of the refuge and planning process. Then, people were invited to talk with Fish and Wildlife Service staff, share their suggestions and concerns about the refuge, and discuss the issues that need to be considered during the planning process. Questions and comments varied widely, but most concerns dealt with wildlife management, unscreened diversions, public use and facilities, water quality, flooding, transportation, and boundary revisions.

Here's What We Heard

We identified issues based on public comments that we received through the open house and by mail. Using your comments and agency comments, we are in the process of analyzing the management situation at the San Joaquin River Refuge. This is a sampling of the issues and concerns that we have received.

General

In general, people supported the refuge as a cultural, natural, and educational resource, supported the Service, and were glad to see the refuge established and preserved. One person didn't want county tax assessments to increase on adjacent land because the refuge had been established and expanded.

Wildlife Management

Most people felt that our primary concern should be wildlife. We received a few comments that cattle and cropping can be compatible with wildlife. One person wanted the refuge to focus on permanent wetlands. Another was interested in reintroducing tule elk. Another felt that the refuge should focus on what attracted geese and waterfowl to the area before making any improvements. Lastly, a comment was made that any environmental restoration that would involve levee breaching in the new refuge land west of the San Joaquin River must consider potential fish entrapment.

Recreation and Public Use

Most comments about public use expressed the desire for access to various parts of the refuge, such as Christmas Island, the San Joaquin River and the interior portions of the refuge. People making those comments believe that access to the refuge will help the public appreciate and support the refuge. Others talked about specific uses, such as camping, photography, and canoeing. Many people wanted interpretation and environmental education at the refuge and the school tour program continued. Some suggested a docent program for outdoor education. Several requested facilities such as a visitor center and birders' blinds to minimize bird disturbance while providing viewing opportunities. Several people were concerned about too

many people using the refuge. Some people wanted hunting and fishing on the refuge, others did not. One person expressed an interest in catch and release fishing only.

Operations

There were several different types of operational comments. Several people requested that the refuge pursue screening water diversions on the refuge to prevent trapping fish in irrigation ditches. Others wanted the refuge to have a full time manager and operational budget and to have the refuge staffed on the weekend. Others wanted the viewshed preserved. Another requested litter removal.

Flooding

We received several comments about flooding. For example, people expressed support for the joint Service/US Army Corp of Engineers' non-structural flood control project. Another person asked us not to dredge the San Joaquin River for flood control. Another asked how flooding would be controlled. We received one specific question regarding who would pay for pumping Miller Lake now that a portion of it is owned by the Service.

Water Quality

A comment was received that the storm water drainage from Modesto that enters into Miller Lake is probably of poor quality. Another person commented that the refuge would attract waterfowl to an area with poor quality water because the San Joaquin River water upstream of the refuge (which flows into the refuge) is of poor quality.

Boundary Revision

Several people commented that they wanted the Service to expand the refuge. Landowners outside the current refuge boundary, up to several miles south of the refuge, expressed an interest in either selling an easement on their property or selling their property in fee to the refuge. Further comment reflected that other agencies are currently restoring habitat along the river and are looking for a stewardship agency like the Service to manage these restored lands.

Transportation

We received many comments about the Highway 132 expansion. Some felt that Highway 132 was unsafe because people drive too fast, pass on double yellow lines, and cause many accidents. Some felt that Highway 132 should not be expanded to a freeway. Others felt that the refuge should construct pullouts along Highway 132, while others thought that Highway 132 is unsafe for a pull out because traffic moves so fast. The refuge did receive a comment that closing Page Road helped decrease traffic in the area significantly.

Vision Statement

Currently, the planning team is working on a vision statement. The draft of the vision statement is as follows:

Refuge management will initially focus on the recovery of endangered species and restoration of historic riparian floodplain habitat and natural ecosystem function. By providing self-sustaining and diverse habitat types in a corridor along the San Joaquin River, this refuge will provide a conduit for multiple species that inhabit the corridor connecting the San Francisco Bay Delta with the interior wetlands of the Central Valley. The refuge will be a mosaic of riparian, wetland, and upland habitats that support native and resident and migratory species.

Through a program of adaptive management, the refuge will be able to respond to changing conditions and incorporate the results of new research.

Since people are an integral component of the Central Valley landscape, the refuge will provide wildlife-dependent public use opportunities, including environmental education, interpretation, and compatible recreation.

We arrived at the vision statement by visualizing what the refuge could look like in the future, given the refuge purposes and input that the public and the Service have provided. The vision statement is compatible with the interim refuge goals written by the Service in 1996 and described in the first planning update.

What's Next?

Using comments we received during the issue-finding period, in addition to the data we've collected, we will review and revise the interim refuge goals and develop objectives, alternatives, and strategies for San Joaquin River Refuge. When we've developed this information, we'll share them with you in a later planning update.

Community Forum

The refuge hosts a Community Forum quarterly at the Stanislaus County Agricultural Center in Modesto. The forum is your opportunity to learn what's going on at the refuge and our opportunity to hear how it affects you. At the last meeting, we discussed issues including sedimentation, flood control, mosquito abatement, and the comprehensive conservation plan. The primary topic of discussion at the last forum was agricultural drainage water. Your ideas, comments, and participation are invited. Now is your chance to get

involved, voice your opinion, and meet others in your community.

Where: Stanislaus County Agricultural Center, UC Extension Conference Room
When: 9:00 am
Date: Thursday, 21 October 1999

For more information, please call Scott Frazer at (209) 826-3508 or Leslie Lew at (916) 414-6503.

See you there!

For More Information

We are available to provide any information that you may need regarding the refuge and this planning process. Also, the Fish and Wildlife Service staff can attend a meeting of your organization to discuss the development of the San Joaquin River Refuge conservation plan. Please notify us at least three weeks in advance to avoid scheduling conflicts.

If you have questions, comments, concerns, or would like information about the , please feel free to call, e-mail, or write us:

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Please pass this planning update along to anyone you think might be interested in the planning process.

Please call or write to us to be placed on our mailing list or to report a change in your mailing address.

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US Fish and Wildlife Service S

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Attention: Leslie Lew